

# Future Directions for Community VCAL Programs



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# Contents

## **Preface**

### **The Need for a Clear Policy Framework**

Issues	4
Comments	4
Actions	5

### **Identification of Community VCAL Students, their Characteristics and Outcomes**

Issues	6
Comments	6
Actions	6

### **Accountability Arrangements**

Issues	7
Comments	7
Actions	7

### **Funding**

Issues	9
Comments	9
Actions	10

### **Promotion of Good Practice**

Issues	11
Comments	11
Actions	11



## Preface

“Community VCAL” refers to a form of VCAL delivery that is tailored to the needs of students who have become disengaged from mainstream schooling, or are considered to be at significant risk of disengaging from mainstream schooling. In Community VCAL, students are generally enrolled at a government school (home school) but the program is delivered entirely by another education provider external to the school site.

Students have become disengaged from education for a range of reasons including: homelessness, family trauma, poverty, mental health problems, low self esteem, previous low attainment, behaviour issues and a poor fit between the students’ learning style and the learning environment in the student’s school. Students in Community VCAL programs are often affected by a number of these issues, so programs and individual student pathways have to be tailored to meet their intensive needs.

There is evidence that many Community VCAL programs have been successful in delivering outcomes for students who have been disengaged from mainstream education settings. However, a lack of data makes it difficult to assess the success of individual programs or the model as a whole. The fact that these programs have developed in response to local needs, without a strong central policy framework, is a source of flexibility, but also leads to inconsistencies in accountability, quality assurance and funding arrangements.

Community VCAL has become an established part of Victoria’s education and training landscape. It is timely to recognise this, and put the program on a better recognised and more sustainable footing for the future.

This statement takes into account a number of developments and reports since the introduction of Community VCAL, including:

- Publication of the *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*;
- *A Review of Accountabilities and Funding of Community VCAL Programs* conducted by the University of Melbourne;
- An audit of some “non-school” VCAL providers conducted by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority in mid-2007;
- Evaluations/audits of individual programs;
- The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* and its regulations;
- The implementation of strengthened school networks, including the appointment of Regional Network Leaders; and
- Publication of the *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools - Student Engagement Policy Guidelines*.

A broader *Alternative Education Review* of government schools in Victoria is currently underway. This will address wider questions of how the education system provides for a broad range of students, and where this fits into the school network model. This statement is narrower in scope, looking at those issues raised by the Community VCAL model operating within the government school sector. These are programs delivered outside the school environment entirely by another education provider. This statement also focuses on actions that can be implemented for 2010.

This statement on future directions for Community VCAL outlines improvements for government schools in five areas:

- A clear policy framework that positions Community VCAL in the context of the *Blueprint* and subsequent reforms.
- Improved data on Community VCAL programs, students and outcomes.
- Stronger accountability for delivery and outcomes.
- More consistent funding arrangements.
- Promotion of good practice in Community VCAL delivery.

# The Need for a Clear Policy Framework

## Issues

- Individual Community VCAL programs have grown up in response to local needs and the ability of Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), Youth Transition Support workers and other parties to create the partnerships that support this delivery. While this local responsiveness is a considerable strength, it offers no guarantee that the distribution of programs across the State matches identified need. There is evidence that this is the case for some rural regions.
- The existence of Community VCAL programs depends on the participation of a government school. Although LLENs and other bodies have been instrumental in brokering these arrangements, the decision on whether to offer access to Community VCAL has been a decision for an individual school. This has limited the capacity for coordinated and strategic provision planning at a network level.
- There has not been clear guidance for schools and their partners on the purpose of Community VCAL, when it is desirable to establish a program, or when it is appropriate to refer an individual student to a Community VCAL program so that their educational outcomes may be maximised.
- Partly as a result of this, the provision of Community VCAL across the State is patchy, and may not reflect the local need for a program, nor have these programs necessarily been established in the most strategic or effective manner.

## Comments

The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* provides a clear policy direction for education in Victoria. *Blueprint* directions that are particularly relevant to Community VCAL include a greater focus on working in partnership, a particular focus on addressing disadvantage, increased school responsibility for young people's post-school transitions, stronger school accountability in general and a stronger role for school networks.

This context provides an opportunity to state a clear purpose for Community VCAL:

'Community VCAL programs are designed to engage those students who are unable to complete Year 12 or equivalent in a mainstream school setting. They aim to support these young people to complete Year 12 or equivalent (either through the VCAL program or following a transition to another setting) and to make a successful transition from the program to further education, training or employment.'

This puts the focus squarely on the students. Key criteria that would inform a student's referral to a Community VCAL program should include:

- The student is unable to complete Year 12 or equivalent in a school setting.
- The external Community VCAL program/provider selected has the capacity to effectively address the student's needs.
- The enrolling school is satisfied about the quality of the Community VCAL program; the provider has the appropriate registration and authorisation to deliver the VCAL, and arrangements are in place to ensure duty of care and student wellbeing.

DEECD Regions, through Regional Network Leaders and later years consultants, as part of their increased responsibility for provision planning, will work to ensure that there are options available for disengaged young people according to need. LLENs will continue to play a key role in assisting in the development of these options. The results of the broader *Alternative Education Review* will inform this work

Regional Network Leaders should be involved in the development of Community VCAL partnerships between schools and providers and be responsible for endorsing and monitoring the development of new and existing programs. This level of

involvement is important given that Community VCAL programs are delivered outside the school environment entirely by another education provider.

The development of a clear framework and process will place the young person at the centre of the picture, with the emphasis on providing access to a variety of programs, where Community VCAL will be one option for addressing a student's educational needs.

## Actions

***DEECD will develop a clear policy framework for Community VCAL partnerships to be strengthened, effective from 2010.***

***From 2010, DEECD will provide detailed guidance to schools on criteria for referring students to Community VCAL programs.***

***DEECD Regions will investigate the need for Community VCAL or similar programs in areas where they do not exist and work to ensure there is provision for a broad range of students in all areas. LLENs will be central to this process. This work will be informed by the results of the Alternative Education Review.***

# Identification of Community VCAL Students, their Characteristics and Outcomes

## Issues

- Students undertaking Community VCAL programs do so for a variety of reasons and include some of the most disengaged and alienated students in the education system in Victoria.
- Students in Community VCAL programs are currently not separately identified, but simply appear in the data of their enrolling school.
- This makes it difficult to monitor numbers of students, their characteristics, learning programs, needs and outcomes. It creates a risk that important trends will be missed, hampers quality assurance and accountability of programs by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), and prevents any funding being targeted towards meeting these students' needs.
- An inability to identify Community VCAL students restricts schools' capacity to report on results that distinguish between their Community VCAL and other programs. Some schools have reported concerns that data on Community VCAL students is distorting the picture of the school's overall outcomes. As a result this can sometimes influence their decision to limit the number of students that may be enrolled in their external Community VCAL program. Given that these programs deal with some of the most disengaged young people with complex needs, it is important that they are monitored separately.

## Comments

Inability to identify Community VCAL students is clearly an impediment to effective monitoring of this delivery and its outcomes, and therefore a potential risk to the quality and level of provision that this type of delivery caters for.

Improved data is a prerequisite for effective implementation of many of the other actions in this statement.

The ability to identify students participating in Community VCAL programs on the VCAA's VASS and the Department's CASES databases will allow for the results and outcomes from a home school's main reporting at the end of the year to be differentiated.

It is important to be able to ascertain the outcomes for students enrolled in a Community VCAL program, so that this data can inform the future directions of Community VCAL, assist with provision of funding to programs, and enable schools to accurately report on their achievements.

## Actions

***From 2010, Community VCAL students will be identified within the VCAA's VASS database and the Department's CASES21 database.***

# Accountability Arrangements

## Issues

- Government schools, where Community VCAL students are enrolled, retain accountability, including the duty of care for these students. However, there are complexities for these schools to exercise these accountabilities when programs are delivered entirely away from a school site.
- Major vehicles for enabling accountability are Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) or contracts between schools and Community VCAL providers. These are vital in ensuring that all parties are clear on what they are legally responsible for, and the quality of the relationship that is necessary for these programs to be effective.
- However, there is evidence of a lack of consistency in accountability arrangements documented in MoUs between schools and community providers. In addition, there is inconsistent practice by schools in monitoring the implementation of the accountabilities documented in the MoUs.
- To exercise their accountability for student outcomes, schools need to be confident of the quality and capacity of the Community VCAL provider, and need to be proactive in building strong and clear partnerships with them to ensure that student needs are effectively addressed. In the past, there has been room for concern where these providers have not been registered as senior secondary providers with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and an authorised VCAL provider by the VCAA.

## Comments

In 2008 DEECD developed and introduced standardised contracts to assist government schools to meet their accountabilities when purchasing senior secondary education and training from external providers, including those under Community VCAL arrangements. These contracts included clear delineation of roles, responsibilities, funding arrangements and quality assurance, through a matrix of responsibilities to be signed by each partner to the agreement.

However, at present schools are not required to use these standardised contracts, but may use pre-existing contractual arrangements (eg MoUs) that conform to the requirements set out in both the DEECD contract templates, and the *Guidelines for Government Schools Purchasing Senior Secondary Education and Training from External Providers*. This has given rise to a lack of consistency in arrangements between schools and providers, and means that both the contract templates and guidelines need to be revised and mandated for use to address the issues identified in Community VCAL arrangements.

The VRQA also requires that all non-school providers of a senior secondary qualification such as VCAL must be registered with the VRQA and authorised by the VCAA.

## Actions

***DEECD will revise the standard contract so that it appropriately reflects the actions of this Statement and will mandate its use for engaging providers to deliver Community VCAL programs. This will apply to both current operating CVCAL programs and new CVCAL programs under development from the beginning of 2010.***

*DEECD will continue to ensure external providers that are engaged in Community VCAL partnerships with schools are meeting the registration and authorisation requirements of the VRQA and the VCAA respectively.*

*DEECD will investigate what support is required for all Community VCAL providers to be a registered (VRQA) and authorised (VCAA) senior secondary provider.*

# Funding

## Issues

- Students enrolled in Community VCAL programs attract funding through the Student Resource Package (SRP) in the same way and at the same rates as all other government school students. Schools use this funding to purchase Community VCAL programs from external providers.
- The amount and mechanisms by which SRP funding is passed on by schools to Community VCAL providers varies. This variation often does not appear to reflect either the division of responsibilities between schools and external providers, or a consistent approach to the way student enrolments or their learning needs are funded.
- Many Community VCAL providers report that the amount and lack of consistency in the level of funding passed on by schools creates difficulties in attracting and retaining quality staff and delivering other elements of a quality program. Historically this has been negotiated between individual schools and providers with no clear guidance on how to determine an appropriate allocation of funds.
- Currently it is not possible to fund student enrolments after the late-enrolment census date of 29 April. This creates a barrier for students who could otherwise be re-engaged through a Community VCAL program later in the year. Evidence suggests that 30 to 50 per cent or more students could be re-engaged throughout the year, depending on region and location, if it was possible to make funding available for these late enrolments.

## Comments

The first step in providing adequate funding for Community VCAL programs is to ensure that the level of funding provided to schools is sufficient to cater for students' needs. The second step is to ensure that funding passed on by schools to Community VCAL providers is allocated in a consistent manner, reflects the respective responsibilities taken on by these providers and the school, and is allocated for the full year for each enrolment.

A broader *Alternative Education Review* in Victoria is currently underway. This will address how the education system provides for a broad range of students and will determine a way forward for resourcing alternative education programs.

For 2010 only, each eligible student referred to a Community VCAL program, as outlined in this statement, will attract an additional payment which is to be passed on to the community provider in full. An additional payment of \$500 is proposed, however this is indicative only and will be dependent upon enrolment growth determined from the April census. A confirmed amount will be provided after the April census.

The passing on of other targeted funding within the SRP should also reflect the division of responsibilities detailed in the matrix of responsibilities attached to the standard contract. For example, where the Community VCAL provider is responsible for developing the student's Managed Individual Pathways plan, the funding provided for this purpose should be passed on. At a minimum, to develop a consistent approach, schools will be required to pass on the base Student Resource Package (SRP) funding received for these students, but they will be able to retain an administrative portion of no more than 5% of the SRP for each student, so that the school can deliver on their responsibilities.

Many Community VCAL programs are already approved DEECD re-engagement programs, allowing them to be funded for late enrolments. Under the new arrangements, all appropriately established Community VCAL programs to which students are referred under the guidelines will qualify as re-engagement programs.

## Actions

*In 2009 DEECD will provide clear guidelines to schools about what funding is to be allocated to Community VCAL providers and a clear mechanism for determining that level for implementation in 2010.*

*All Community VCAL programs to which students are referred, as outlined in this statement, will be deemed to be approved re-engagement programs and will therefore have capacity to accept late enrolments after the February census date and receive SRP funding to support those students.*

*From 2010 DEECD will provide SRP funding for late enrolments, on a pro-rata basis, to the end of August for approved programs.*

*In the short-term, for 2010 only, additional funding will be made available for eligible students clearly identified as participating in Community VCAL programs that are sustained or developed in a manner that conforms to the new guidelines. Mechanisms and criteria for the allocation of these funds will be determined in 2009.*

*For 2011 and beyond, funding mechanisms and levels for Community VCAL will be considered in the context of changes developed through the Youth Compact and 'Securing Jobs for Your Future - Skills for Victoria', and will be consistent with recommendations from the Alternative Education Review.*

# Promotion of Good Practice

## Issues

- Community VCAL providers would benefit from the opportunity to access professional development, sharing of good practice or provision of professional support services to teachers in Community VCAL programs.
- While the model of provision varies between Community VCAL programs, effective collaboration between all organisations that provide support to young people is required to ensure that the needs of these young people are met.

## Comments

The delivery of a senior secondary certificate to students who have high needs for support is a demanding and specialised task. However many of the teachers who operate within a community environment to deliver on this task do so without much peer and professional support. Indeed it seems that there is a small and inconsistent knowledge base about the Community VCAL programs that are known to be running in any given year, in any given region or locality.

There is clearly a need to develop a means of enabling effective association between teachers and programs to share best practice, identify professional development needs, and develop effective collaboration with other community workers who are providing support services to these students.

The construction of a clear authorising process and framework for Community VCAL programs as part of a regional strategic process will assist in the identification of programs at a regional level. This will allow effective models of provision to be determined, professional development to be implemented, and services provided in areas where there is significant need to maximise student retention.

## Actions

***DEECD will facilitate the establishment of a Community VCAL network for 2010, assisted by the more formal identification of providers and students made possible under these guidelines.***

***DEECD in association with the VCAA will arrange for the delivery of professional development opportunities to Community VCAL teachers in 2009/10 and beyond.***